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ABSTRACT

This letter to members of the American Federation of Teachers from the President of the Federation overviews the current employment situtation in education and advocates a change in educational focus from numbers of children educated to quality of education offered. The Federation position on universal and free early childhood education and day care under the sponsorship of the public schools is discussed. (Author/RH)

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THE STAKE OF THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

A message to America's teachers
from Albert Shanker, President of the
American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO

Dear AFT member,

Reports have been coming in from all across the country. The economic depression which we are experiencing is not limited to employees in the private sector of the economy—teachers and the public schools are hurting too. There are many reasons:

☐ **Inflation has driven school costs up, but taxpayers are more reluctant to increase taxes to meet these costs because of their own economic problems.**

☐ **Cities and states are collecting less in tax revenue than they expected because the unemployed do not pay taxes. At the same time, the cities and states must spend more during this period on welfare, unemployment, and medical care for the indigent. Little is left for school costs.**

☐ **The declining student population has resulted in the inability of new graduates to find teaching jobs. Teachers who are laid off find it impossible to locate other teaching jobs, or, in many cases, any jobs at all.**

☐ **Professionals laid off in other jobs are seeking teaching positions.**

Many teachers remember the advice of parents and friends that, "If you go into teaching, you know there'll always be a job." Others remember hearing that, "During the Depression of the Thirties, teachers were well off." These pieces of advice are now viewed as bits of nostalgia from a bygone era.

Nevertheless, all across the country, teachers are worried—and they should be.

The coming months and years could become periods of disaster, but they need not be. Since the end of World War II, the schools have wrestled with a single overall problem—How to deal with the problem of **quantity?** The huge "baby boom" meant that we had to build schools and find teachers for millions of additional students. Also, additional shortages of space and personnel were created because students were staying in school much longer than they used to. No longer was an elementary-school graduate considered fairly well educated and a high-school graduate very well educated, as they had been before the war. And, while we struggled to meet these educational needs, the schools faced competition from business, industry, and other occupations which were attracting teachers away from their teaching jobs.

Under the circumstances, our schools did very well. We educated millions more than ever before and we gave them more education.

But there were many things we could not do even when the money was available.

Whenever we pressed for substantial reductions in class size, kindergarten for all children who wanted to attend, early childhood programs, teacher-internship training, and many other programs, we always heard the same answers, "Even if we had the money for these programs, we couldn't do them. You can't do these things without more teachers and we can't even find enough teachers to staff our regular programs. The only way we staff our schools now is by employing teachers who do not meet certification standards. Also, you can't do these things without space. We don't have the space for our regular programs. Some of our children are forced to attend half-day sessions."

The situation is now radically changed. We no longer have a shortage of teachers or of space **for the programs which are now in existence.** This means that now- -for the first time since the end of World War II—we can turn our attention from dealing with the problems of **quantity** to the question of providing **quality.** We can turn to providing services which we always wanted to provide but were unable to.

There are many worthwhile educational services which should be provided now that we are able to, but **none is of greater importance than day care and early childhood education.** There is widespread agreement with the findings of Benjamin Bloom ("Stability and Change in Human Characteristics," 1969) that more than half of "intelligence measured at age 17" develops before the age of 5. "This would suggest the very rapid growth of intelligence in the early years and the possible great influence of the early environment on this development.

"We would expect the variations in the environments to have relatively little effect on the I. Q. after age 8, but we would expect such variation to have marked effect on the I. Q. before that age, with the greatest effect likely to take place between the ages of about 1 to 5."

In addition to the importance of providing the right learning environment during the formative years—when concepts of language are developed, as well as number concepts, self-image, and social relationships—there is a growing demand on the part of mothers for such services so that they can

Photographs on front, page 3 and page 5 by Susanne Anderson

either enjoy some leisure, return to school, or go to work.

The program should have strong support from teachers. We have always believed in the need for starting earlier, but now it can be done. It should have the support of school boards and administrators, both for educational reasons and also for practical reasons. Adding these programs to the schools will not only provide continuity with later schooling; it will also enable districts to avoid the community war which is inevitable whenever a board is compelled to shut down a school because declining enrollments require the consolidation of several schools. The program should have strong support from parents, women's-rights groups, and labor unions.

Even those concerned with the cost of such a program can frequently be convinced during this depression period. After all, the government spends about $8,000 for each unemployed worker for unemployment benefits, medical care, food stamps, and other services. Wouldn't it be far better to pay a million people to work and provide a valuable service—than to pay nearly the same amount and leave people out of work?

The Congress is now considering the Child and Family Services Act of 1975 (S. 626, H.R. 2966), sponsored by Sen. Walter Mondale (D-Minn.) and Rep. John Brademas (D-Ind.). The bill has 25 bipartisan sponsors in the Senate and 82 in the House of Representatives. Hearings have been held and further hearings will take place soon. Sen. Mondale's opening remarks at the February hearings indicate that he understands the importance of the bill. Mondale said, "Clearly the economic situation in our country will and should affect the consideration of this bill. Unemployment is now at the absolutely intolerable level of more than 8 percent. Families and children are also suffering from double-digit inflation. There are, obviously, many important programs in the areas of tax relief, tax reform, public-service jobs, improved unemployment compensation, and other fields that require the immediate attention of the Congress and the President."

The introduction and consideration of this legislation is a great opportunity. Unfortunately, the bill in its present form has many major shortcomings. Changes are needed, and they will only be made if there is a major effort made by all of our member locals and their members. Some of the major issues are:

Should early childhood education and day care centers be funded if they are owned and operated for private profit?

Our answer is, "NO." But the bill, as presently written, would permit such funding. Recent scandals in nursing homes and hospitals show what can happen when private for-profit companies are given government funds to provide public services. Invariably, the private company reduces the quality of the services in order to increase the profit. Where they cannot reduce the quality of services, they lobby to remove standards of quality. Early childhood education should be a public service provided by the public sector.

Should early childhood education and day care be universal and free or should it be available only to the poor, or by paying a fee?

The AFT supports universal, free early childhood education and day care. Unfortunately, the bill does not. It provides services for the poor while others would have to pay. The poor, of course, need these services more than anyone else; but experience shows that programs that are for the poor alone generate opposition from those who also have a need, but who do not qualify as "poor." Thus, programs solely for the poor often do not provide **quality** services. Furthermore, programs which begin as programs for the poor, can be expanded only with difficulty or not at all. (Medicare cannot be expanded into National Health Security.)

Programs for the poor do not have sufficient political support over a period of time to protect the program from fiscal cutbacks. These programs become viewed as "giveaways" by the middle class. The legislation must be changed to provide free universal programs.

Who should provide prime sponsorship of such programs?

One would think that in any expansion of programs for children, the public schools would be a prime sponsor of such programs. Not so in the bill. The public schools are not even mentioned as a prime sponsor. Monies would go to state and local governments.

They could fund for-profit or private nonprofit programs, or the monies could be administered by

newly developed child-care agencies. The funds also could be scattered among many government, church, private, anti-poverty agencies, etc. In this case, new systems of governance would have to be developed.

Experience with anti-poverty agencies and similar programs has shown that when new systems of governance are established it takes years of conflict and years of experience before the services can be smoothly delivered. By that time, the public is usually fed up, funds are reduced, and programs wither. One great advantage of public-school sponsorship is that school boards are already there. They know (better than any newly formed agencies) how to provide services, how to administer funds. They don't have to go through a long learning experience—they are doing these things now.

And while teachers know better than anyone else how frustrating it can be to work with and through the existing school bureaucracy, the creation of a separate, new bureaucracy solely to manage early childhood education is no answer. (Some say that states and local governments will be able to give the funds to public schools if they want to. This is true, but experience with federal funds for public-service jobs and revenue sharing indicates that very little of this money ever gets into public education.)

What qualifications will be needed to work in the program?

Over the years, the public schools have developed standards for the employment of certified and non-certified personnel. These standards are, of course, not perfect. They are subject to change. Also, there will be some qualifications needed for early childhood programs which will be unique to them, just as there are now differing requirements for different programs and age levels within public schools. Public-school sponsorship would lead to the development of such standards.

Many who oppose public-school sponsorship already are involved in developing a totally different (and untested) set of "performance based" standards. These are designed to reduce qualifications and may later be used to attack existing standards in elementary and secondary schools. The program is designed to show that if good programs can be run with "cheaper" and "less qualified" personnel for three-, four-, and five-year olds, why not for six-, seven- and 17-year olds. The attack on standards which we have successfully resisted at the local and state levels is now reemerging as part of early childhood.

In addition to these questions, there are others which are part of the debate. There is strong support for "community control" of the programs and for a "voucher" system of choice. The debate surrounding the program is a familiar one. There is indication of the strong influence of the critics of teachers and the public schools. Why should the public schools sponsor early childhood education when they can't even teach the students they already have? Why subject these children to the horrors we have read about in Kozol, Holt, Friedenberg, Illich, etc.? Isn't this a chance to establish an alternative school system which will show how bad

the public schools really are? To show that teachers don't need college degrees? To show how good a system you can run without tenure? And without union contracts?

At a recent debate, Jule Sugarman, currently the chief administrative officer of the city of Atlanta, let the cat out of the bag in a public debate. He argued against public-school sponsorship. "Not the least of these problems [with public school auspices] is the growing unionization of public schools. Most unions I see speak for fine classrooms . . . only so many teaching hours . . . so big a caseload . . . If Mr. Shanker could assure me that's the way it ain't going to be . . .," but, "I think they will successfully unionize the public schools . . . We will have to conduct early childhood programs with parents alone." Clearly, Mr. Sugarman dreams of the good old days when there were no teacher unions around to ask for limits on class size, and decent facilities.

In the coming months, Congress will make some crucial decisions in this area. These decisions are not yet made. A multi-billion dollar program can emerge, but not without a vigorous campaign. The program could be free, universal, high-quality, providing many programs in and out of school, jobs for unemployed teachers and paraprofessionals, and valuable services to children and parents. The services could be provided by an institution which is already there and which works.

Or, the program could become part of the irresponsible attack on teachers and the public schools.

Which of these will occur depends on all of us—on what we do. The American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO, will do its job in Washington. We will lobby vigorously for our program. We will keep you informed so that each member can help.

We urge you to let your U.S. senators and representatives know that early childhood education belongs in the public schools.

Fraternally yours,
Albert Shanker